

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

January 29, 2012

**GATHERING IN COMMUNITY**

MUSICAL PRELUDE

**SCRIPTURAL GREETING: Arise, shine, for your light has come;**

**and over you the glory of God has dawned.      Isaiah 60:1**

PROCESSIONAL “Holy, Holy, Holy”      VU 315

WELCOME

**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

**One: Great are the works of God and greatly to be praised. God’s righteousness endures forever.**

**All: We come together as a congregation of believers. We give thanks to God with a whole heart.**

**One: God is gracious, merciful and trustworthy. At all times, God is mindful of the covenant.**

**All: The works of God’s hands are established among us. We can count on God’s righteousness and faithfulness.**

**One: Awe before God is the beginning of wisdom. All who approach God in fear have good understanding.**

**All: Holy and awesome is God’s name. We call on God to empower our worship.**

**OPENING PRAYER: God of the prophets, help us to recognize your voice among the competing claims of our day. Raise up in our midst authentic witness to your truth. Be present with us now to guide our prayers and praise. Let us not presume to know your message without careful listening or to speak your word without discerning the Spirit. Light your fires within us so we may heed your summons and give our best in your service. Amen**

**Opening Hymn: “How sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds”      VU 344**

**CALL TO CONFESSION:** We are called to confession if we have distorted God's word, knowingly or unknowingly. We are invited to repent if our freedom in Christ has led others astray. We join in prayer together because the church is not yet the perfect body of Christ. Let us ask God's forgiveness as we pray together our prayer of confession:

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION:** Faithful God, we have claimed to have more knowledge than we really possess. We have presumed to judge others on the basis of our limited understanding. We have grasped for freedom without taking full responsibility for our actions. Our witness is weak, and is directed primarily toward those with whom we prefer to associate. By our actions, some of our sisters and brothers are excluded, some mislead, and some are unjustly accused. If we have violated another's conscience, if we have caused someone to fall, we are deeply sorry. For failing to do all Christ expects of the church, we repent and seek your forgiveness. Amen.

**ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:** All who love God are known by God, whose intention is that we live by eternal values, in loving relationship with each other. God applauds our efforts to rid our lives of pseudo-gods we create, habits that destroy, and prejudices that divide. We count on God to understand us, to free us from our bondage to sin, and to dwell among us, transforming our lives. Praise God forever and ever!

### **HEARING GOD'S WORD**

**CHILDREN'S HYMN:** "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus" VU 357

LEARNING TIME TOGETHER

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Responsive Psalm: Psalm 111 (VU p. 833)

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 8:1–13

### **MINISTRY OF MUSIC**

Gospel: Mark 1:21–28

MESSAGE: "Authority"

**HYMN:** "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit" VU 620

## RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

### LIFE AND WORK OF THE CONGREGATION

OFFERTORY INVITATION: An important way to give thanks to God is through sharing the bounty we have been honored to receive. We can not do enough to earn God's generous blessings. We can only express our gratitude by passing on our gifts. It is a privilege to be able to give.

### COLLECTION AND DEDICATION

OFFERTORY PRAYER: By giving away some of the wealth we cherish so much, we keep ourselves focused on who you are, gracious God, and on what you expect of us. As the body of Christ, we are to be a healing force in our world. We offer these gifts knowing they will encourage helpful and healthful behaviors among us in the church, within our community, and as far as our influence can reach. Receive us and our gifts, we pray, in Jesus name. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER: We bring the needs of the church, the world, and all in need to you, Loving God. Through Jesus you promise to hear us and we are confident of your love and mercy. Empower the church throughout the world in its life and witness. Break down barriers that divide, that, the church can unite in truth and love and confess your name, share one baptism, sit together at one table and serve in one common ministry. Guide the rulers of the nations. Inspire them to strive for peace and justice, that all your children may dwell secure, free of war and injustice. Hear the cries of the world's hungry and suffering. Give us, who consume most the earth's resources, the will to reorder our lives, that all may have their rightful share of the food, medical care, and shelter, and so have the necessities of a life of dignity. Strengthen this congregation in its work and worship. Fill our hearts with your self-giving love, that our voices may speak your praise and our lives show your grace for all the world. Look with compassion on all who suffer. As you have moved toward us in love, so lead us to be present with them in their suffering in the name of Jesus Christ, your witness of love to the world and who taught us to pray ... Our Father ...**

CLOSING HYMN: "Your Hands, O Christ" VU 622

### BLESSING

**We thank God for this time of being together, for freedom to worship and grow. Praise God for the insight and guidance received and take delight in the ways others can be helped. Go out to witness to the good news you have heard.**

**You do not go alone. Amen**

Is everyone familiar with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? Out in Saskatchewan, well Fort Qu'Appelle anyway, they celebrated the week last week with each different denomination holding a service so no matter what the day, they were praying. Which is after all what the week is all about. Do you know how it started.

Well, the Week – sometimes referred to as an “octave” in church talk – is a yearly ecumenical event dating back to the early part of the twentieth century, a time when many Christians zealously hoped and prayed for healing and oneness among the churches. Paul Wattson, an Episcopal priest and later convert to Roman Catholicism, hit upon the masterful idea of promoting an entire week of the church year as a time of prayer for Christian unity. And he appropriately chose the week in mid-January that falls between the festival days of the two great Apostles, Peter and Paul, for this new observance. The concept caught on, and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is nowadays commemorated in many and diverse denominations across Christendom. However, actual unity among Christians, let alone all people, remains as elusive a goal today as it was over a century ago in Father Wattson's time.

It is tempting to wish for a conciliator among us, such as Paul attempts to be with the Christians of Corinth – as disgruntled a group of believers as you would ever want to meet. In our second reading today, he addresses them on the then-current hot topic of “food sacrificed to idols” and whether it is proper for followers of Christ to eat it. Since we know, as Christians, that “no idol in the world really exists,” Paul explains to the Corinthians matter-of-factly, “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” Yet some believers, he hastens to add, are scandalized at the thought of eating such sacrificed fare, and so, “If food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat.” And that is that, as far as Paul is concerned.

Perfectly sensible.

Needless to say, few in our world today are as self-effacing or ready to compromise as was Paul on such a controversial topic. And we, of course, will never know with certainty if the people of Corinth in fact heeded his example of tolerance or respected his authority as an Apostle.

We have spoken a lot about “power” and “authority” at our Learning Circles ... probably because we are learners, who, although we have been gifted with Pastoral Charges which some would consider positions of power or authority, yet we feel very much the power and authority wielded over us at times.

So, what is the difference? The two words seem to go very well together but they infer two very different things. Here are a few things the Oxford dictionary says about power - an ability to do or act – a particular faculty of body or mind – influence, authority – control – energy – and the list goes on. We use the word power in many situations and indeed authority is there but what about authority? How is it different? Once again if we turn to the Oxford dictionary authority is – power or right to enforce obedience – delegated power – influence based on recognized knowledge or expertise. Well, that makes it clear doesn't it ... or maybe not. The way I see it ... power is taken, people assume positions of power in many ways and that power can just as easily be taken from them. Authority is a gift ... authority is given and I believe authority is given by God and recognized in a person by their behavior ... by the way they speak ... by the way they treat others ... by the way they walk into a room ... you just know there is something very different about them. Some might argue that a corrupt judge or police officer has authority but I would choose to disagree. They have a power they are misusing that is not authority but that is just my opinion.

Our Gospel reading today speaks about Jesus as a person speaking with authority. There is actually a story within a story as Mark likes to do and we do not actually know what words Jesus spoke that conveyed the authority. The story begins with Jesus faithfully attending synagogue on the Sabbath but he does not just attend, he teaches those gathered – religious experts as well as the people gathered around them. His teaching style was so impressive that it conveyed authority. It held a wisdom and integrity that people found compelling and it came from within him. The scribes sounded authoritative because they could recite the scriptures and laws but that was their job. Scholars and preachers today do much the same thing. So, when Jesus, the dusty carpenter from Nazareth, walk into the synagogue and started speaking in a way that amazed the people, more than one person must have thought ... ohhh noooo ... here comes trouble. This was no ordinary day in church. And just when they thought they were grasping a sense of what he was saying and what it meant to them ... a man tortured by an "unclean-spirit" steps forward and all of a sudden Jesus words are not so important anymore. Jesus actions speak louder than his words and the evil presence is told to be quiet and come out of the man freeing him from a terrible bondage.

We don't hear any more about this man, but the whole region heard about what happened to him. Jesus had backed up his words, and his powerful preaching, with an action that illustrated what he was about.

Today, we would try to apply a scientific explanation for what happened, we want to rationalize everything. We have more power over our lives than our ancestors had, and understand many things. Or, we like to think we do when in fact we know far less than we think we do.

Our faith has its roots in the story of Israel, and we hear in the reading from Deuteronomy the same promise they heard, of a prophet who speaks in the name of God. To us, Jesus is that promised one. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue and introducing himself and his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. In Mark's Gospel, we don't hear such beautiful words. Instead, we hear words like "destroy," "rebuke," and "convulsed." In Mark, we see actions, powerful, dramatic ones that proclaim just as surely that the promises of God are true, the promises of old are new, in the person of Jesus. "His care for the poor in spirit and mournful is demonstrated," Mike Graves writes. "The authority here in Mark is not power...but a willingness or right that has everything to do with seeing justice served. This is what Jesus' ministry is about."

In any age and in any religious setting words can easily become just words. Words spoken in the name of God, however, have power and can make things happen, which is what every minister hopes for on Sunday mornings, not just to provide more information about the text, although that has its relevance, not to simply add more words to all the other words ever spoken from a pulpit. We hope that our words, infused with the power of the One who speaks through us and on whose behalf we speak, will cause something to happen. We pray for transformation, for something to happen in the United Church and in every church. Then, everyone will be awestruck, not just by what they think they see, but by the reality they encounter in God's love made known in the world God loves.

As we reflect on the divisions among the churches – and in our own hearts and communities – we might well want to know: What, in heaven's name, did Jesus actually teach or say in that synagogue in Capernaum so long ago? What was so amazing to people? The gospel text frustratingly does not tell us. Maybe, like Paul, he talked about food sacrificed to idols? Probably safe to say he did not. Did he bring up in Capernaum any of the controversies and heresies that would plague his church over the coming centuries? Again, I doubt it.

Perhaps he did, however, tell the people of God's fatherly love and care for them. Perhaps he illuminated, as no one before, the teachings of the great prophets going back to Moses. Or he might have spoken of the kingdom of God, as he so often did, and of the promise of redemption and forgiveness of sin.

We simply do not know.

But we do know for sure that he addressed the unclean – and troubled – spirit afflicting the man in the Capernaum synagogue and commanded, simply and clearly, “Be silent, and come out of him!” Perhaps that is what we need to remember: That it is only in silence – and prayer – that the troubled spirits of today will come out of us all and free us from conflict and sin, and make us once again one people in Christ.

Be silent. And listen.

Hmmm.

It might be worth a try.

Assistance in writing this message came from Kathryn Matthews Huey and Rev. Dr. Frank Hegedus.